

# I Think I Have

By Lt. Ben Cone

Unaided approaches to and landings on to small decks at night aren't necessarily difficult, but they can be dangerous. In the HSL community, we regularly practice this core competency as a prerequisite for NVG-deck currency.

# the Leans


## *Spatial* DISORIENTATION

Any helicopter pilot who regularly lands on the deck of a “small boy” at night, can tell about events ranging from the benign to the terrifying. You’ll hear about the dreaded “black hole,” whose sole job is to sucker a helicopter pilot into landing 100 feet short of the ship. You’ll hear about excessive closure rates or about the time pilots were so high they lost sight of the flight deck. My story isn’t quite as hair-raising as others, but the consequences could have been just as disastrous.

It was an hour after sunset. My crew just had completed another CD-ops mission in the Eastern Pacific. The last part of our flight was to include a 30-minute DLQ period for my copilot. Our ship recently had returned to deployment from a two-week, mid-cruise maintenance period, and my copilot hadn’t flown at night in nearly three weeks. Before sunset, we had noticed several isolated showers in the area. The weather did not concern us, however, because visibility seemed only to be reduced mildly in those areas.

We rolled into his DLQs, and his first approach to landing was uneventful. As we took off for our second approach and turned downwind, the ship drove into one of the isolated showers. When we set up for final at more than two miles out, the ship easily was visible; the rain was only a minor annoyance. I briefly turned on the windshield wipers to get a clear view of the ship. There wasn’t enough rain to keep the wipers on during the course of the approach.

My H2P was flying his approach right on the numbers, and we hit one-half mile at 200 feet. As he continued to descend, the water again pooled on the windshield. I turned on the windshield wipers to see the lights on the boat. I also had turned on my copilot’s windshield wipers. At precisely the time I turned on his wipers, he glanced up from his instruments to check his lineup with the ship. He saw an obscure light source completely disappear as the wiper crossed his view; then a very clear set of lights reappeared. There was enough visual stimulation to give him the leans; he was convinced we were turning, even though the aircraft was wings level. Getting the leans is not good when you are below 200 feet in a descending and decelerating profile. Much to my copilot’s credit, he immediately recognized his situation and told me. I took the controls and waved off the approach. We climbed to a safe altitude, as I turned away from the ship. We talked about what had happened, and he quickly regained his sense of balance.

To give my copilot a better sight picture to the back of the boat, I inadvertently gave him the leans during a critical phase of flight. This bad situation could have turned a lot worse if he had remained silent. Fortunately, he quickly realized the problem, and he said something. If I only had mentioned I was turning on the wipers! 

Lt. Cone flies with HSL-42.